

THE DEMANDS AND EXPECTATIONS IN ESP ADULT TEACHING: ENGLISH FOR BBA EXECUTIVES

By

FUZIRAH BT. HASHIM *

ZARINA OTHMAN **

* Lecturer, School of Language Studies & Linguistics, University Kebangsaan, Malaysia.

** Tutor, Centre of Liberal Studies, University Kebangsaan, Malaysia.

ABSTRACT

Teachers often adopt a particular teaching and learning approach in their classes to ensure that effective learning takes place. It is assumed that teaching working adults would require the teachers to indirectly adopt an approach that suits the learners. Knowles (1978) theorized that adult learners have distinct and unique characteristics and therefore require continual opportunities to identify their needs and recognize the relevance of their learning (Knowles, 1978, Zemke & Zemke, 1981). They need self directed learning opportunities in which they can actively participate. A learner-centred approach is commonly practiced in ESP classes in order to cater to learners' needs and expectations. This paper attempts to make recommendations on the feasible use of IT approach in its material use to enhance the quality of teacher expertise based on an investigation on the course effectiveness of Public Speaking to BBA executives. The data gathered is based on an investigation on the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of a Public Speaking course to a group of working adult students. We had interviewed four instructors who were involved in teaching a course on Public speaking to a group of BBA executives. Questionnaires were also distributed to the learners to mainly investigate their perceptions of the approach used by their instructors and the effectiveness of the present module in general.

INTRODUCTION

When one sits in judgment of a "borderless education", one may understand it in countless manners. One's understanding could be the idea that education is meant for all which means that there are no restrictions on who can learn and who cannot. In today's world, education does not only concern the young, adolescents or university students but it also encompasses education for adults and interestingly, the inclination towards education for working adults.

In view of that, it is significant for one to think about the challenges, especially in the teaching and learning of adult learners. Burt and Keenan (1998) investigate the training needed in teaching ESL adults in the United States. They state that instructors need to know how to work with a learner population that is diverse in race, culture, native language, economic status, motivation for learning the language and educational background. Besides these factors, they maintain that ESL teachers need to know the following:

1. How adults learn best and how instructions can best facilitate this learning
2. How adults learn a second language
3. How to teach others from a variety of cultures.

Some principles to be included in facilitating the learning are as follows:

New knowledge has to be integrated with previous knowledge; that requires active learner participation.

Collaborative modes of teaching and learning enhance the self-concepts of those involved and result in more meaningful and effective learning.

Adult learning is facilitated when teaching activities promote question asking and answering, problem finding and problem solving.

Adult skill learning is facilitated when individual learners can assess their own skills and strategies to discover inadequacies or limitations for themselves. (Dewar 1996)

Abu Bakar et al (2000) remark that the assumption that

teaching adults would require a different approach compared to teaching children and adolescents is attributed to Knowles who argues that the more traditional pedagogical model is not suitable for use with adults. Furthermore, today's theories about learning and instruction for adults assume that:

Adults are self directed in their learning

Adults have reservoirs of experience that serve as resources as they learn

Adults are practical, problem-solving-oriented learners

Adults want their learning to be immediately applicable to their lives

Adults want to know why something needs to be learned.

(M.A. Cunningham & M Burt: October 2001)

With these principles in mind, teachers are somehow challenged to adopt a particular teaching and learning approach in handling the adult learners to result in a more meaningful and effective learning. As claimed by Auerbach (1992) quoted from Holt (1995), Knowles and other educators maintain that adult education is most effective when it is "experience centred, related to learners' real needs, and directed by learners themselves".

However, it is interesting to note that Garrison (1994) in Abu Bakar et al (2000) claims that adult education is essentially the same process as education generally and therefore does not warrant a separate teaching approach. All these theories and beliefs orbit in the region of ESL context, i.e. the teaching of English as a Second Language to adult learners. Nevertheless, educators also need to look into the teaching of English Language courses to adult learners, which are of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) in nature.

In the case of this study, the researchers intend to investigate the kind of challenges faced by instructors who teach a Public Speaking course to a group of working adult learners. The fact that they are working adults may impose an even greater challenge on the part of the teacher.

Thus, the objectives of this study are to investigate the challenges encountered by these ESP practitioners and the approach they adopt to deal with the challenges. This study also probes the students' perception of the teacher

factor in its contribution towards the effectiveness of the course. It is hoped that the results and the discussion of this research would contribute towards a more effective approach in teaching ESP working adults.

In response to the Government's call to have more graduates among the working professionals, the Faculty of Business Administration (FPP), UKM, in 1996, introduced two new three-year programmes. The programmes are known as the Bachelor of Business Administration for Executives (BBA-E) and the Bachelor of Accounting for Executives (BAC-E). They are offered to working adults, specifically executives who are interested to pursue their studies at a tertiary level and to provide opportunities to the executives to obtain a degree without having to leave their jobs.

These learners have to work during the day and attend academic classes at night, which is the nature of these BBA programmes. Moreover, they bring with them job experiences which may pose a challenge to the instructors. Thus, it would be interesting to explore how these instructors cope with the teaching of the working adults and the approaches they use to overcome the challenges involved.

It is the researchers' opinion that it would be interesting to study this group of learners, as they are different from the normal population of campus students. As Strzalka (1988) says:

"Adult learners differ from other age groups in respect to their learning experience, memory type, motivation and most of all, in respect to their needs and expectations".

Haverkamp (1983) supports this by saying, "there are individual differences in motivations, goals, experience, moral and cognitive development, academic preparation, intelligence, initiative, employment background, skill levels and sophistication."

Data

Two methods were adopted to obtain data for this study; interviews and questionnaire survey. The sample for the interviews comprised four experienced instructors teaching the Public Speaking course, two females and two males, each with more than ten years of teaching experience. These instructors have experienced teaching the BBA-E and

BAC-E students as well as the normal population of students on campus. The teachers were interviewed between half an hour to one hour each and their responses were recorded. Two main aspects were discussed in the interview, which were the challenges faced by them in teaching the working adults and the approaches adopted in class to deal with the challenges.

As for the questionnaire survey, the sample consisted of 62 working adult learners from both the BBA-E and BAC-E programmes. They were given the questionnaire at the end of the course that is on the 14th week of the semester. The questionnaire consisted of 4 sections:

- A. Student's Biodata
- B. Course Effectiveness
- C. Class Activities
- D. Teacher-Student Relationship

The questions for the Student's Biodata section included background information on student's age, sex, occupation and qualifications. As for the course effectiveness section, it sought detailed information about the learner's improvement in public speaking skills namely voice control, body language, ability to generate ideas (content) and language. There was also a question on characteristics that have made the course interesting.

The next section requested for the learner's opinion on the class activities while the last section dealt with teacher-student relationship. There was also an open-ended question whereby the learners were asked to give their views on the characteristics of an ideal instructor.

The Challenges Faced By The Instructors

Student Expectations

Generally, the students are between 25 – 45 years old and they all have working experiences ranging from various disciplines and organisations. These students expect new knowledge and expect the instructors to deliver the knowledge to them. In other words, the expectations rest in the content of the course and the instructor's delivery of the content. Thus, students' expectations appear as the most obvious challenge as according to all the instructors, the moment they walk into the class they can already sense the expectation the students have of them.

Student Attitude

Instructors find that the BBA students are confident regardless of their proficiency level. They also find that the students are more compelled to do well in the course so as to achieve good grades as this would affect their results and indirectly their chances of performing well in their workplace. Due to their confidence and enthusiasm, they are naturally willing to participate in class discussions and are often ready to ask questions on matters that arouse their curiosity. Hence, the instructors believe that the students generally have positive attitude towards learning at the start of the course with a higher level of motivation as compared to the normal population.

Teacher Credibility

Instructors agree that the students sometimes test their knowledge on the subject matter. This is due to students' realization that instructors do not have the 'hands on' experience and the instructors themselves are aware of it too. Therefore, there maybe instances whereby students may challenge the input given by the instructors by relating or bringing in their workplace practice in which the instructors need to deal with. One of the teachers revealed that her students would bring in samples of their workplace tasks to show the teachers and to compare them with the input that the instructors had delivered.

Content

One of the instructors points out that one has to be aware that the adult students have had a lifetime of experiences. Often, they would prefer that the teacher acknowledges this extra characteristic that they possess.

Classroom management

Instructors find it a challenge having to deal with the student's errors, class participation or even disciplinary problems of coming late to class or sending in late assignments. Although they are motivated with positive attitude to learn, it is important that the instructors deal with their setbacks in a more ethical way that is suitable to adult students.

Teacher personality

All instructors believe that there is a need to have a warm personality. They feel that they need to appear less

authoritative in order to create a good rapport with the students. Instructors believe that a good rapport will result in better cooperation from the students and that this is very crucial when teaching adult students.

Assessment

Instructors are asked to give feedback when assessing the students' performance whether it is classroom activity or evaluation assessment. As working adults, they often deliver a high standard of performance in the class room presentations. They expect a well-justified evaluation on their performance.

Having discussed the challenges faced by the respective instructors, we now proceed with the investigated approaches adopted by these instructors in dealing with the challenges.

The Approach Adopted.

Cannot Teach Them But Learn Together With Them

The instructors feel that they need to be prepared to learn from the students too. This is because it is obvious that the students have a wealth of experience that may perhaps supersede the instructor's knowledge and experience.

Less book-based

The instructors also find that it is not feasible to follow the given syllabus strictly. They feel that it is crucial to bridge the theory and practice as the latter plays an important part in the instructors' delivery of the course content.

Negotiate Content

In relation to the above factors, the instructors agree that they need to be able to negotiate the content of the syllabus. Therefore, it is important for instructors to diagnose students' needs and expectations of what they would like to achieve at the end of the course.

A good Rapport

The instructors find that a good rapport with the students will create a better acceptance of criticisms or comments when given to the students. This will ease the difficulties of relating to the students their mistakes and errors in their classroom tasks. A good rapport will also help the instructors to deal with a more difficult situation such as class absenteeism. In brief, the instructors' approach in BBA class

is to go along with the students but to "still hold the string". This means that instructors believe that they still need to be firm on the deadlines of assignments despite the teacher - student friendly rapport.

Peer Evaluation

Peer evaluation seems to be a more common approach adopted by the instructors. The instructors believe that the students may feel less intimidated with their peers' comments. At this point too, instructors see it as an opportunity to learn real workplace practices from the students' experiences to compensate instructors' absence of 'hands on experience' generally. As Hajibah (1997) points out, "adult learners are a relatively new breed in the Malaysian education arena and teaching them requires a different approach."

Student Feedback

A majority of the students gave positive feedback with regards to the improvement of skills after taking the course namely in these areas:

1. voice control (speed, pitch, clarity, loudness)
2. body language (posture, eye contact, gesture)
3. content (in generating ideas)
4. language (grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure)

In general, the students are satisfied with the course content, teaching approach, instructors, peers, and the physical environment. Most of the subjects felt that the activities or practices conducted in the classroom are useful and motivating. All the students agree that instructor's feedback on their mock presentation has helped them to prepare for their final evaluation speeches.

Enhancing teacher Quality.

From the teacher- student responses we conclude that teaching working adults is a challenging and demanding task for the instructors. In dealing with these challenges, the instructors seem to have adopted several approaches namely learning together with the learners (as the learners bring their workplace knowledge with them), including learners' experience as their content syllabus as well as negotiating content with them, creating good rapport and conducting peer evaluation. It is obvious that there is a need for the instructors to be innovative in preparing

supplementary materials and organizing classroom activities to meet the demands of the working adults. They also need to sustain and maintain the students' learning desires. Primarily, the instructors have to be conscious of learners' diverse wealth of life experiences that they bring to the learning situation and active forms of learning help connect the content to the learners' own meaning structures (Dirkx, Lavin & Pelavin 1995).

Based on these concluding remarks and our years of teaching experience, we feel that an opportunity for a more innovative approach has arisen to deal with the challenges in teaching working adults. The recommended approach would perhaps be able to increase the teacher quality and adult learners' enthusiasm even more in an ESP learning environment. The approach incorporates the use of IT specifically the use of self audio/video, digital video recordings of individual students' speech presentations with reference to a Public Speaking course module. This is a possible supplementary material or input to further enhance the effectiveness of the course module.

Student Self Audio/video Digital Recording

As a start to a Public Speaking course, we recommend that each student prepares a self-recorded speech presentation. They are also required to transfer the audio/video recording onto a CD and instructors need to inform the students a week or two prior to the start of the course. A task sheet may be emailed to the registered students before the students begin the course with ample time given for them to complete the task. The students could be asked to prepare a short presentation of perhaps an introduction about them. Teachers may find this as an alternative approach of getting students to introduce themselves to the class instead of the usual class introduction that students are often asked to do during the ice breaking sessions in a classroom. With these CD recordings, the teachers can use them in the first session of the course to introduce members of the class in place of the usual self-introduction activity. The use of this recorded CD presentation should be able to assist the instructors to deal with the challenging issues faced by them which are listed below.

Able to Diagnose

The instructors have claimed that the initial challenge that they often encounter is the students' high expectations of the content of the course and the instructors' delivery of the content. Thus, by doing this, the instructors are able to diagnose the students' level of proficiency as well as their skills in public speaking. With the self-introduction where students may be asked to talk about themselves and to describe their job positions, instructors are also able to gauge the possible exposure that each student has in their working environment.

Content : On-going Syllabus

Instructors are also able to use this method as a trigger point to devise a syllabus for the course module. With the early diagnosis that the instructors are able to make from the introductory speech, the primary components which the students have the intention to improve could be identified. These components could derive from the earlier students' response with regard to voice control, body language, content and language. The instructors are also able to identify more specific areas such as speed, clarity, loudness, eye contact, presentation of ideas and perhaps choice of words for students to improve.

Negotiable Content

With the speech introductory CD, the instructors may be able to elicit from the students further information regarding the students' working environment and situations in which they are required to do Public Speaking. This allows an opportunity for the instructors to also elicit from the students areas in which they would like to improve and problems that they may have encountered when having to give a public speech in the various job situations. It will also solve the instructors' awareness to use the students' experiences to develop the syllabus content.

Peer Evaluation

This approach of self-recorded speech on a CD may be used as a means that could allow peer evaluation. Students may be given copies of their colleagues' presentations on CDs with a task to evaluate each of the presentations. Students could produce a write-up of comments focusing on areas that need improvement or

otherwise. Instructors are then also able to evaluate individual student's comments and perceptions of effective or ineffective presentations.

Conclusion

This approach will reflect a sense of professionalism on the part of the teacher and the students. Since working adults have much more exposure of using IT in their working environment, the requirement to utilize IT equipment is perhaps no alien to them. Similarly with the instructors, it would increase their professionalism in line with advanced use of IT in the world today and the innovative use of IT in teaching and learning. Instructors may evaluate students' presentations on the computer and this allows the instructors to keep a record of students' improvement as well as being able to review the presentation repeatedly when necessary to award marks to individual students' presentation.

In considering the role of technology in adult learning, instructors are faced with a number of challenges, including how to respond to technology and how to exploit it without diminishing the learning experience (Field, 1997). Our aim should therefore, not be to replicate the classroom on the desktop, but to use the technology available to us to significantly improve the teaching/learning process.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Fuzirah Hashim has 17 years of teaching experience. She did her MA in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) in University of Warwick, United Kingdom in 1997 and currently working on her PhD in the area of Linguistics in University of Malaya, Malaysia. Her areas of interest include ESP, Adult learning and Corpus Linguistics.



Zarina Othman is attached to the Proficiency Language Unit, Centre of Liberal Studies, UTM and have 17 years of teaching experience. She taught English to upper secondary students at a boarding School in the state of Pahang before moving to teach at tertiary level of education. Her qualifications are B.Ed (Hons) TESL (Teaching English as Second Language) from University of Kent (UK) and MESL (Masters in English as a Second Language) from University Malaya (Malaysia). Currently pursuing a post doctoral degree in Linguistics at Lancaster University (UK). Her research thesis is on the Exploration of Discourse Makers in Academic lectures. Her research interests are in Discourse Analysis: Analysing spoken discourse and Academic discourse, issues of EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and the teaching of adult learners.

